

# AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOLOGY

---

## FOAM-BORN APHRODITE AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

WILLIAM HANSEN



IN HIS ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH of Aphrodite (*Theogony* 176–200), Hesiod tells how Kronos castrated his father, Ouranos, and threw the severed genitals into the sea.<sup>1</sup> The narrator envisions Kronos waiting in ambush upon the mainland (or, from another perspective, upon his mother Gaia) with a sickle in his hand. When Ouranos descends, stretching himself out over Gaia in order to engage in sexual intercourse, Kronos takes hold of his father's genitals with his left hand, cuts them off with his adamantine sickle, and casts them behind him. As the severed organ hurtles through the air, blood falls from it onto the land below, impregnating Gaia with several kinds of offspring. It settles finally upon the waters of the sea; in time foam issuing from the organ surrounds it, and within the foam a girl coalesces. Making her way to land, she passes by the island of Kythera, located off the southern coast of the Peloponnese, and reaches distant Cyprus, where she emerges

<sup>1</sup>The text presented here is that of West; the translation is mine. West (1966, 223) brackets 196 because of its proleptic mention of Cytherea: the epithet has nothing to do with the connection of Aphrodite and foam and is not explained until line 198. It can moreover be omitted without destroying the syntax of the larger sentence, although it does change what the sentence predicates. Without the line the assertion is that gods and men call her “Aphrodite,” whereas with the line the thought is that gods and men call Aphrodite “the foam-born goddess and fair-garlanded Cytherea.” My English translation does not reproduce the ambiguity of the Greek syntax. Whether the line is genuine is not crucial to my thesis, and for simplicity of argument I accept West's text in the discussion that follows.

onto dry land.<sup>2</sup> The circumstances of her birth, Hesiod explains, account for her epithet “Fond-of-genitals,” just as her particular route is commemorated in the epithets “Cytherean” and “Cyprus-born,” which link her to particular sites. She can be said to have been born on Cyprus because it was there that she emerged from her foam-womb, the matrix in which she developed.<sup>3</sup>

- ἦλθε δὲ νύκτ' ἐπάγων μέγας Οὐρανός, ἀμφὶ δὲ Γαίῃ  
 ἱμείρων φιλότητος ἐπέσχετο, καὶ ῥ' ἐτανύσθη  
 πάντῃ· ὁ δ' ἐκ λοχέιο παῖς ὠρέξατο χειρὶ  
 σκαίῃ, δεξιτερῇ δὲ πελώριον ἔλλαβεν ἄρπην,  
 180 μακρὴν καρχαρόδοντα, φίλου δ' ἀπὸ μήδεα πατρὸς  
 ἔσσυμένως ἤμησε, πάλιν δ' ἔρριψε φέρεσθαι  
 ἐξοπίσω. τὰ μὲν οὖν τι ἐτώσια ἔκφυγε χειρός·  
 ὅσσαι γὰρ ῥαθάμιγγες ἀπέσσυθεν αἵματόεσσαι,  
 πάσας δέξατο Γαῖα· περιπλομένων δ' ἐνιαυτῶν  
 185 γείνατ' Ἑρινῦς τε κρατερὰς μεγάλους τε Γίγαντας,  
 τεύχεσι λαμπομένους, δολίχ' ἔγχεα χερσὶν ἔχοντας,  
 Νύμφας θ' ὡς Μελίης καλέουσ' ἐπ' ἀπείρονα γαῖαν.  
 μῆδεα δ' ὥς τὸ πρῶτον ἀποτμήξας ἀδάμαντι  
 κάββαλ' ἀπ' ἡπίρριοιο πολυκλύστῳ ἐνὶ πόντῳ,  
 190 ὡς φέρετ' ἄμ' πέλαγος πουλὺν χρόνον, ἀμφὶ δὲ λευκὸς  
 ἄφρὸς ἀπ' Ἀθανάτου χροὸς ὥρνυτο· τῷ δ' ἔνι κούρῃ  
 ἐθρέφθη· πρῶτον δὲ Κυθήροισι ζαθέοισιν  
 ἔπλητ', ἔνθεν ἔπειτα περὶ ῥυτον ἵκετο Κύπρον.  
 ἐκ δ' ἔβη αἰδοίῃ καλῇ θεός, ἀμφὶ δὲ ποίῃ  
 195 ποσσὶν ὑπο ῥαδινοῖσιν ἀέξετο· τὴν δ' Ἀφροδίτην  
 [ἀφρογενέα τε θεὰν καὶ εὐστέφανον Κυθήρειαν]  
 κικλήσκουσι θεοὶ τε καὶ ἄνδρες, οὐνεν' ἐν ἄφρῳ  
 θρέφθη· ἅτῃρ Κυθήρειαν, ὅτι προσέκυρσε Κυθήροισι·  
 200 Κυπρογενέα δ', ὅτι γέντο περικλύστῳ ἐνὶ Κύπρῳ·  
 ἥ δὲ φιλομειδέα, ὅτι μηδέων ἐξεφάνθη.

<sup>2</sup>Or, making *its* way to land, *it* passes . . . where she emerges. . . . The precise subject of the initial verbal ideas cannot be determined.

<sup>3</sup>Her birth is partly parallel to the birth of the Furies, Giants, and Melian nymphs, and partly not. In their case blood falling from Ouranos' organ impregnates Gaia, who gives birth; in Aphrodite's case the organ with its semen lands in the sea, but the sea is not thereby impregnated, nor is it said to give birth.

- Great Ouranos came bringing on night, and around Gaia  
 he spread himself out in his longing for love, and was stretched out  
 in every direction. From ambush his son reached out  
 with his left hand and with his right hand took the huge sickle,  
 180 long and saw-toothed, and furiously cut off  
 the genitals of his own father and threw them backwards to  
     be borne  
 behind him. But they did not escape his hand without effect,  
 for all the drops of blood that rushed out  
 Gaia received, and in due time  
 185 she brought forth the powerful Erinyes and the great Giants,  
 shining in their armor and with long spears in their hands,  
 and the nymphs whom they call Meliai on the boundless earth.  
 Now after he had cut off his genitals with adamant  
 and had cast them down from the mainland to the stormy sea,  
 190 they were borne along the sea for a long time, and around them  
     white  
 foam arose from the immortal flesh, and in it a girl  
 grew. First she approached holy Kythera, and from there  
 she reached sea-washed Cyprus.  
 Out of the sea the reverend and beautiful goddess stepped, and  
     round about  
 195 grass grew beneath her slender feet. Her  
 ["Foam-born" goddess and fair-garlanded "Cytherean"]  
 gods and men call Aphrodite, because  
 she grew in foam, "Cytherean" because she reached Kythera,  
     and also  
     "Cyprus-born" because she was born on stormy Cyprus, and  
 200 "Fond-of-genitals" because she came forth from genitals.

In this passage the poet manifestly strives to bring Aphrodite into association with as many aspects of her cult as possible while at the same time maintaining a dramatically coherent narrative. Aspects of the goddess that the narrator acknowledges explicitly include the name Aphrodite itself (she develops in *aphros*, "foam, slaver, froth, sperm");<sup>4</sup> her epithet "Fond-of-genitals" (she is born from a severed sexual organ), which suggests also her role as goddess of sexuality; her epithet

<sup>4</sup>On the etymology of "Aphrodite" see Boedeker 1974, 6-14.

Kythereia (she passes near Kythera); and her epithet Kyprogeneia (she comes ashore at Cyprus).<sup>5</sup> Aspects of the goddess that are possibly signaled here implicitly are her role as a divinity of the sea (she is born at sea) and her title Aphrodite Ourania ("Aphrodite, Daughter of Ouranos" and/or "Celestial Aphrodite" as opposed to Aphrodite Pandemos, "common Aphrodite").<sup>6</sup> So the narrative teems with references to different aspects of Aphrodite.

An element of considerable importance in this narrative is foam. The goddess originates in it, and she gets her name from it. The reason why the myth brings Aphrodite and foam into a significant relationship is doubtless because in popular etymology her name was understood to contain the word *aphros*. The myth provides an *aition* for the name in the form of a biographical detail: because she arose in foam she is named "Foam (+ something)."

What kind of foam then does Hesiod have in mind? The foam may of course be sea foam. An object falls onto the sea, and foam naturally gathers around it. This view is stated simply and without argument by Dümmler, who says: "Hesiodic myth . . . has Aphrodite born from sea foam."<sup>7</sup> Or, just as obviously, the foam may be semen. Licht confidently declares:

In many handbooks Aphrodite is said to have been born from the foam of the sea; this is, of course, sheer nonsense. In the oldest source of the myth it is stated quite clearly (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 190): "The member was borne a long time over the sea and round it was white foam, which came from the immortal member, and in it the maiden was nourished." The member, which was cut off immediately before the act, was already full of sperm; this now gushes out, and in and with the sea produces Aphrodite. There is no allusion to the foam or froth of the sea.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>West puts it succinctly: "Aphrodite is formed in foam to explain her name. But she is born in Cyprus, so the foam drifts towards Cyprus; and she is also Cytherea, so it drifts past Cythera" (1966, 212).

<sup>6</sup>Nilsson sees latent aetiologies here, whereas Sale does not (see Sale 1961), though they are not commenting upon precisely the same thing: Nilsson speaks of the Greek *myth* and Sale of Hesiod's *text*, which is only one instantiation of the myth on one occasion.

<sup>7</sup>Dümmler 1894, 2770: "Der hesiodische Mythos . . . lässt A. geboren werden aus dem Meerschäum."

<sup>8</sup>Licht 1932, 182 n. 1; similarly, Friedländer 1931, 257.

Discussions of the myth, ancient and modern, scholarly and popular, take or imply one of these positions, although in many cases the interpreter's stance is not clear. Both views—the foam is semen, or it is sea foam—are attested from antiquity.<sup>9</sup> Modern interpreters seem most often to have sea foam in mind. Thus Gantz appears to be thinking of sea foam when he says of Aphrodite that “she is born from the foam (*aphros*) that drifts past Kythera to Cyprus,” and Burkert probably means the same when he says: “As the sea swept them [the genitals] away, a white foam gathered about them and in it there grew a maiden.”<sup>10</sup> Sometimes these two positions are joined. West (1966, 212–13) understands the foam to be sea foam but allows that there may be an allusion as well to semen. Some scholarly authors of popular books on mythology represent the two substances as being in a state of mix. For example, Powell writes: “The sea-foam, mixed with semen, sloshed around them [the genitals] until from the ‘foam’ (= Greek *aphros*) appeared a being of dreadful power, Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love” (1998, 84).

A few scholars understand Hesiod altogether differently here, taking him to mean that Aphrodite is born, not from foam, but from the severed member of Ouranos, or even that the member itself is transformed into Aphrodite.<sup>11</sup> This position is surely incorrect. True, Hesiod does say (196–200) that the goddess is born from Ouranos' genital organ, stating that “Gods and men call her . . . ‘Fond-of-genitals’ because she came forth from genitals.” But to take this statement as excluding foam is a misreading. Since the genitals produce the semen that in turn produces the maiden, she can be described as being born either from foam (the nearer matrix) or from genitals (the more remote matrix) because birth from foam implies also birth ultimately from genitals.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, all ancient interpreters understand Aphrodite as being born

<sup>9</sup>For the foam as semen see Cornutus 24, Nonnos *D.* 13.439, and schol. vet. *Theog.* 191 (τὸν ἀφορισμὸν τῆς μίξεως, τὴν ἀφροειδῆ σποράν). For the foam as sea foam see, e.g., Ov. *Fasti* 4.61–62: *sed Veneris mensem Graio sermone notatum auguror: a spumis est dea dicta maris.*

<sup>10</sup>Gantz 1993, 100; Burkert 1985, 154–55.

<sup>11</sup>Caldwell 1987, 40; see also Caldwell 1989, 150–51. Harris and Platzner 1995, 51.

<sup>12</sup>One may see additional support in the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* 6.1–5, which in allusion to the birth of Aphrodite speaks of her being carried on the waves to Cyprus “in soft foam” (ἀφρῶ ἐνι μαλακῶ).

from foam, and Hesiod himself states explicitly that she “grew in foam” (198). What the ancients disagree about is not the role of foam as matrix but the nature of the foam. In the present passage, then, Hesiod means that the flesh produces foam, which in turn produces a maiden.<sup>13</sup>

I return to the main issue. What one finds in interpretations of the Hesiodic passage is that the foam is taken without argument to be semen or to be sea foam, or the foam is treated with such vagueness that it is not possible to ascertain how the writer understands the myth. In sum, there is no general agreement about the nature of the foam in which Aphrodite is born.

Which interpretation, then, is preferable? Let me marshal arguments that might be brought forward on behalf of each view.

First, sea foam. Since sea foam will gather about an object in the sea, it is hard to deny the possibility that the poet has the foam of the sea in mind. Moreover, since Hesiod says that the foam appears after a long time, he might seem to have sea foam rather than ejaculate in mind. Besides, why locate the scene in the sea if only semen, and not sea foam, is intended? Does not the sea as the site of the event make the thought of sea foam all but inevitable in the mind of the poet’s audience? Finally, since the word *aphros* is more often employed in Greek to refer to sea foam than to semen, it is statistically more likely to refer to sea foam.

Second, semen. Since Ouranos is castrated just as he is about to have sexual intercourse with Gaia, it is hard to deny the possibility that Hesiod has semen in mind. Moreover, the idea that fluid from a severed sexual organ readily produces offspring is already established in the mind of the poet’s audience by the fact that drops of blood fall upon Gaia and result in the birth of offspring. Most important, Hesiod expressly says that the foam arises *from* the member (ἀφρὸς ἀπ’ . . . χροῦς ὤρνυτο), not that it comes from the sea. Ouranos was after all engaged in, or about to engage in, sexual intercourse. And the word *aphros*, though used more frequently of sea foam, is well attested in the sense of semen.<sup>14</sup> Finally, if there is no significance in the sexual member—if any object would do—how are we to explain its presence here?

<sup>13</sup>It is so understood in schol. vet. on the passage τῷ δ’ ἐνὶ ζούρῃ: τουτέστιν ἐν τῷ ἀφρῷ τῆς μίξεως (191).

<sup>14</sup>Diogenes of Apollonia (DK A24, B6); Hippoc. 7.470 Littré; Oppian *H.* 1.518; Orph., fr. 183 Kern; Nonnos *D.* 13.179.

Finally, the comparative evidence of Anatolian and Orphic myth argues for Aphrodite's birth being connected with genitalia and genital fluids, not with the foam of the sea. In the cognate Hurrian myth Kumarbi (corresponding to Kronos) bit off the genitals of the sky god Anu (corresponding to Ouranos), became impregnated with three deities, and gave birth to them through different orifices of his body.<sup>15</sup> The Hurrian and Greek myths thus agree that (1) a challenger castrates Sky (bites/cuts off his genitals) and (2) the genitals produce offspring in their new environment (in Kumarbi's belly/on earth and on the sea). And according to the Orphic version of Aphrodite's birth, desire took hold of Zeus, he ejaculated, and the sea received his sperm, giving birth in time to "foam-born Aphrodite."<sup>16</sup>

There are therefore persuasive arguments in support of each interpretation, and though the second interpretation seems to me to be the stronger, neither is dislodged. How can we resolve this dilemma? It is not satisfactory to speak exclusively of sea foam or semen, while at the same time it seems only slightly more satisfactory to speak of both substances as being in a state of mix or to suppose that Hesiod has one substance in mind but may allude also to the other.

I wish to offer a different solution, namely, that the relationship of sea foam and semen in this myth is one of *identity*. To explain and justify this perhaps surprising interpretation we must consider several kinds of relationship that myths of metamorphosis can predicate.

Narratives of transformation, like metaphors, establish a connection between two different things. In classical mythology the character-

<sup>15</sup>For the text in translation see Hoffner 1990, 40–43; for a discussion, Kirk 1970, 213–20. As soon as Kumarbi learns that in swallowing Anu's "manhood" he has become impregnated with three deities, he expectorates, and (although the fragmentary text is difficult to interpret) his mix of spittle and sperm possibly falls to the ground and begets one of the deities. If so, the fluid that derives ultimately from Anu's member and impregnates the earth is parallel to the blood from Ouranos' member that falls upon Gaia and impregnates her. Kumarbi's excrement, being a kind of foam, corresponds more closely to the seminal foam in which Aphrodite is born.

<sup>16</sup>*Orph.* fr. 183 Kern:

τὸν δὲ πόθος πλέον εἶλ', ἀπὸ δ' ἔκθορε πατρὶ μεγίστωι  
αἰδοίων ἀφροῖο γονή, ὑπέδεκτο δὲ πόντος  
σπέρμα Διὸς μεγάλου· περιτελλομένου δ' ἐνιαυτοῦ  
ὥραις καλλιφύτοις τέκ' ἐγεργισγέλωτ' Ἀφροδίτην  
ἀφρογενή.

istic transformation, which I label *radical*, is a physical transformation of one thing to a drastically different sort of thing such as a human being to an animal (or the reverse), to a plant (or the reverse), or to a stone (or the reverse).<sup>17</sup> In the legend of Aktaion, for example, Artemis changed the youthful hunter into a stag, after which he was torn apart by his own dogs.<sup>18</sup> Thus, here,

youth > stag.

The reverse transformation, from animal to human, can be illustrated by the myth of the origin of the Myrmidons, in which Zeus changed certain ants (μύρμηκες) into human beings, the first Myrmidons:

ants > humans.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the radical physical change that the subject undergoes in this kind of transformation, the original form and the terminal form typically show little visual resemblance to each other, although they frequently resemble each other otherwise in some way such as in name (μύρμηκες/Myrmidons) or behavior.

A different class of metamorphosis calls attention to homologies, so that this sort of metamorphosis can be termed *homologous*.<sup>20</sup> The clearest examples are transformations of a single creature into a complex of different but related things, in which components of the former are homologized to components of the latter.<sup>21</sup> When the Babylonian god Marduk created the cosmos from the corpse of Tiamat, he cut her in half like a fish, making her upper half to serve as the sky and causing other parts of her to become other features of the now-familiar world.<sup>22</sup> The homologous transformations include:

<sup>17</sup>On transformations in Greek mythology, esp. radical transformations, see Forbes Irving 1990.

<sup>18</sup>For the story see Gantz 1993, 478–81; Forbes Irving 1990, 197–201.

<sup>19</sup>E.g., *Ov. Met.* 7.614–60; see also Forbes Irving 1990, 315.

<sup>20</sup>A possible example of homologous transformation from classical myth is the petrification of Atlas. When Atlas was changed into the Atlas mountain range, his torso became the bulk of the mountain, his head its summit, his bones its stones, his shoulders and arms its ridges, and his hair and beard its forests (*Ov. Met.* 4.655–62); see Lincoln 1986, 10.

<sup>21</sup>For this kind of transformation see esp. Lincoln 1986.

<sup>22</sup>*Enuma Elish*, tablets 4–5. I use Dalley's translation (1989, 254–57).



Tiamat's upper half ≈ sky  
     lower half ≈ earth  
         udder ≈ mountains  
         thigh ≈ sky support  
         eyes ≈ sources of Tigris and Euphrates  
         spittle ≈ clouds  
         poison ≈ winds, rain, fog.

The similarity of eyes and sources of water is inobvious, but physically both are openings of a sort and linguistically both share a single name in Akkadian (*īnu*, “eyes,” “springs”).<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in Norse myth Odin and his brothers slew the primordial hermaphroditic giant, Ymir, and constructed the cosmos from his body, including

Ymir's skull ≈ sky  
     flesh ≈ earth  
 blood/sweat ≈ bodies of water  
     brains ≈ clouds  
     hair ≈ trees  
     bones ≈ mountains.<sup>24</sup>

In some homologous transformations it is unclear whether a physical metamorphosis actually takes place at all. The roof of the Babylonian cosmos may be literally nothing other than the upper half of Tiamat, just as the Norse sky may consist simply of Ymir's unmodified skull. Consequently, unlike radical transformations, in which the central fact is a permanent physical change, in homologous transformations it is a permanent change of function.

A third kind of metamorphosis, *aspectual*, may not seem to merit the label of transformation at all. For example, Ovid recounts how Au-

<sup>23</sup>Dalley 1989, 276 n. 31.

<sup>24</sup>Snorri Gylf. 8. *Gylfaginning*, or *The Deluding of Gylfi*, is part of the *Edda*, usually called *Prose Edda* or Snorri's *Edda*, composed in the early thirteenth century by the Icelandic Snorri Sturluson. Bodies of water (seas, lakes, ocean) were produced by Ymir's blood or perhaps by his sweat: Snorri speaks of *blóð* (“blood”), whereas the verses he cites speak of *sveiti* (“sweat,” but also “blood”).

rora wept tears of mourning for the death of her son Memnon, her tears still appearing upon the entire earth as dew.<sup>25</sup> Thus

Aurora's tears = dew.

In this mythologem the tears of the dawn goddess and the phenomenon of morning dew are brought into a relation of identity. Unlike radical transformations, these involve no actual physical change of substance or form whereby tears are changed into dew. Rather, tears and dew are the same thing seen from two different viewpoints, so that the transformation is, as it were, that of the viewer's perspective. From a celestial perspective certain beads of moisture are tears of Dawn, but from a terrestrial perspective they are dewdrops.

Ovid appears to be the only ancient source for dew as the tears of Eos/Aurora, but he is unlikely to have invented the idea himself since the interpretation of dew as tears shed by one or another being is attested in other lands. For example, there is a regional tradition in modern Poland according to which dew is the tears of angels and of souls in purgatory who weep over the sins of humans on earth. On days on which no dew falls, people say that humans have been particularly sinful so that the tears are insufficient.<sup>26</sup> Here

angels' tears = dew  
tears of souls in purgatory = dew.

This example also shows that an aspectual transformation can be essentially one of folk belief rather than of folk narrative, for there is no story here, only a popular interpretation of the nature of dew clothed in the cosmology of the regionally dominant religion. A comment upon the dew, its abundance or paucity on a particular occasion, is perhaps the trigger that typically calls forth a mention of the tradition, which doubtless some people take seriously and others do not.

Since I shall argue that aspectual transformations are crucially relevant to the problem of foam in Hesiod and since this kind of tradi-

<sup>25</sup>Ov. *Met.* 13.621–22: *luctibus est Aurora suis intenta piasque nunc quoque dat lacrimas et toto rorat in orbe*. On aetiological narratives in Ovid see in general Myers 1994, although she does not comment upon aspectual transformations. On dew in ancient Greek tradition see Boedeker 1984.

<sup>26</sup>Knoop 1912, 89. One has the impression from Knoop that the Poles in question, presumably peasants, took this belief seriously, but Knoop provides more information on the traditions themselves than on his informants and their attitude to their traditions.

tion has received little comment from mythologists, I dwell for a while upon transformations of aspect.

According to the story of Myrrha, attested in several Greek and Latin authors, Myrrha's father pursued her, angry at her deceit in having seduced him, but the gods transformed her into a tree. She still weeps, and warm drops issue from the tree, tears that are called "myrrh" after her.<sup>27</sup> So

Myrrha's tears = sap.

A similar idea is found in the Greek story of Phaethon, who perished in his attempt to drive the chariot of his father, the Sun. In a motif attested as early as Hesiod, Phaethon's mourning sisters, the Heliades, were transformed into trees and continue to shed tears, which exude from the trees as fluid, which the sun in turn changes into amber.<sup>28</sup> Although the narrators focus upon the transformation of the Heliades' tears ultimately into amber, there is an intermediate stage in which the Heliades' tears are necessarily identified with the resin that drips from the trees:

Heliades' tears = sap ≈ amber.

The formation of the traditions about Myrrha's tears and the Heliades' tears was facilitated by the usage of the Greek language, according to which the sap that exudes in the form of drops from certain trees was known as the "tears" of the trees. For example, Aristotle speaks of amber and other substances that are called tears (δάκρυα), such as myrrh, frankincense, and gum.<sup>29</sup>

In another tradition, the spring called Kleite came into being after a woman, Kleite, hanged herself following the untimely death of the

<sup>27</sup>For the ancient sources see Roscher I 72; Forbes Irving 1990, 274–77. For example, Ov. *Met.* 10.499–502: *quae quamquam amisit veteres cum corpore sensus, flet tamen, et tepidae manant ex arbore guttae. est honor et lacrimis, stillataque robore murra nomen erile tenet nulloque tacebitur aevo.*

<sup>28</sup>Hes. fr. 311 MW. For the numerous later sources see Roscher I 1983; Forbes Irving 1990, 269–71. Ovid (*Met.* 2.364–66) describes it as follows: *inde fluunt lacrimae, stillataque sole rigescunt de ramis electra novis, quae lucidus amnis excipit et nuribus mittit gestanda Latinis.*

<sup>29</sup>Arist. *Mete.* 388b19–21. See further LSJ s.v. δάκρυον I, 2 (*OLD* s.v. *lacrima* 3 shows the same usage). The formation of these and other traditions (e.g., dryads) involving a transformative relationship between female beings and trees was of course facilitated by the fact that trees are grammatically feminine in Greek; cf. Thompson 1972, 18.

man she loved. The woodland nymphs grieved for her, forming a spring from their tears; alternatively, it formed from Kleite's own tears:<sup>30</sup>

nymphs'/Kleite's tears = spring.

Tears are also a feature of the myth of the musical contest between Apollo and the Phrygian satyr or silenos Marsyas, which concluded with Apollo's hanging the creature upside down and flaying him. From the creature's blood issued the River Marsyas, or it came from the tears of the woodland spirits and shepherds who wept for him:<sup>31</sup>

Marsyas' blood/mourners' tears = river.

A comic instance of aspectual transformation is found in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Strepsiades, having just learned the true cause of rain, exclaims that previously he thought rain was the result of Zeus' urinating through a sieve:<sup>32</sup>

Zeus' urine = rain.

That rain results from Zeus' urinating was probably a traditional idea belonging to the lore of children. The thought lay nearer at hand to speakers of Greek than it does to us, since of course Greeks could describe the process of raining not only impersonally ("[it] rains") but also personally ("Zeus rains" or "god rains").<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>The former version is recounted by Apollonios Rhodios (1.1063–69). The latter seems to be the sense of schol. vet. ad loc., though its text is incomplete: "Neanthes and Deiochos recount that Kleite hanged herself and from her a spring in Kyzikos . . ." Forbes Irving (1990, 301) infers from this that the spring was formed from Kleite's own tears.

<sup>31</sup>The variation between blood and tears here is reminiscent of the apparent variation between blood and sweat in the myth of Ymir. According to the usual story (e.g., ps.–Palaiphatos 47, Hyginus *Fab.* 165) it is the blood of Marsyas that becomes the stream of the same name; see Forbes Irving 1990, 301, 304. Ovid (*Met.* 6.382–400) is alone in saying that the earth takes in the *tears* of those who weep for him, making them into water and sending it up into the air. I do not press the slight suggestion of physical transformation implied in Ovid's saying that the earth made the tears into water (*lacrimas . . . fecit aquam*), nor the similar possibility in Apollonios' account of the origin of the spring Kleite (δάκρυα . . . κρήνην τεύξαν θεαί).

<sup>32</sup>Ar. *Nu.* 373: καίτοι πρότερον τὸν Δί' ἀληθῶς ὤμην διὰ κοσκίνου οὐρεῖν.

<sup>33</sup>That is, Ζεὺς ὕει, ὁ θεὸς ὕει, or simply ὕει; see LSJ s.v. Conversely, Greek οὐρέω ("urinate") and οὐρανός ("sky," and the personified sky Ouranos) are cognate with Indo-European nouns signifying "rain" or "dew" (Nagy 1974, 275; Boedeker 1984, 2–4), so that the Greek words preserve an old analogy between urine and rain made by speakers of Greek. For analogies between urine and rain in early Indic poetry (rain as the urine of Soma, rain as the urine of the Maruts; also, rain as the semen of the Maruts) see Nagy 233–37.

Aspectual transformations are attested in other mythological traditions as well. An Egyptian papyrus alludes to “Seth’s spittle,” by which it apparently means salt:<sup>34</sup>

Seth’s spittle = salt.

According to Plutarch the Egyptians identify the sea as Typhon (i.e., Seth), and he adds that Egyptian priests refer to salt as “Typhon’s *aphros*” (i.e., Seth’s slaver) and are forbidden to put it on the table.<sup>35</sup>

In Norse myth the gods stuck a sword into the mouth of the monstrous wolf Fenrir, forcing it to remain open. The wolf “howls hideously, and the slaver running from his mouth is the river called Vón” (Snorri *Gylf.* 34):

Fenrir’s slaver = river.

Further, the morning dew is actually foam that drops from the bit of Hrímfaxi, the horse that draws across the sky the chariot ridden by Night (*Gylf.* 10). Thus,

Hrímfaxi’s foam = morning dew.

Another aspectual transformation is found in the myth of Baldr’s death. Hel, the goddess of the death realm, agreed that Baldr might return to life if everything in the world, both living and nonliving, should weep for him. So all things in the world—creatures, stones, trees, metals—tried to weep Baldr out of Hel’s realm. The evidence of this is that one can see these things weeping when they emerge from frost into warmth (*Gylf.* 49):

tears of all things = condensation.

It is characteristic of aspectual transformations that the first element (or source) is a bodily exudation of a celestial or terrestrial being, and the second element (or result) is an ordinary phenomenal substance of the earth’s surface. In the former slot we have observed tears, blood, slaver, and urine, and in the latter we have found dew, condensation, rain, spring/source, river, salt (presumably conceived of as dried slaver), and sap.

In terms of time and rhythm, aspectual transformations can be represented as ongoing (or recurrent) or as unique events. At one ex-

<sup>34</sup>Griffiths 1970, 421–22.

<sup>35</sup>Plut. *De Is et Osir.* 32 363E: τὸν ἄλλα Τυφῶνος ἀφρόν καλοῦσι.

treme, phenomena such as rain, dew, and condensation are by nature recurrent: rain is intermittent, dew may occur on successive mornings, and condensation forms under certain conditions of temperature and humidity. At the other extreme, bodies of water are typically persistent by nature: once established, they endure. The tears that produce the spring Kleite are presumably shed for only a limited time, if not in the case of those shed by the nymphs then certainly in the case of those wept by Kleite herself. Similarly there are mythological traditions in the lore of different peoples according to which a particular body of water is the result of a character's urinating on one particular occasion. Thus in a Chukchee myth, Raven was trying to create the earth. In the course of his efforts he urinated; wherever a single drop fell, it became a lake, and wherever a stream fell, it became a river:<sup>36</sup>

Raven's urine = lakes, rivers.

Phenomena such as rivers lie in between the durative and stative extremes, for they can be imagined as being continuously supplied, like the River Vón that is fed by the slaver issuing unceasingly from Fenrir's howling jaws, or they can be represented as having been established once and for all time by an extraordinary but finite event, as in the case of the blood streaming from the flayed satyr that created the River Marsyas or in that of the urine passed by the Amerindian culture hero Raven that became different rivers.<sup>37</sup> According to the nature of the phenomenon, then, an aspectual transformation can be an ongoing, recurrent, or finite event.

Each of the three kinds of metamorphosis discussed here conveys a different emphasis: radical transformations foreground drastic changes of form and/or substance; homologous transformations call attention to changes of situation and function; and aspectual transformations emphasize the essential identity of two apparently different substances, the transformation being that of the viewer's perspective. These distinctions are not rigid and exclusive, for changes of form, function, and aspect can be found in any of the three. Thus instances of radical

<sup>36</sup>Dundes 1988, 171.

<sup>37</sup>That the flow of Marsyas' blood from his body was commonly envisioned as a finite event rather than an ongoing process is a commonsense inference and also follows from the "fact" that his dry hide was on public display in Phrygia; both Herodotos (7.26) and Xenophon (*An.* 1.2.8) mention it. One should add Marsyas' hide to the instances of public display of fabulous creatures that are collected in Hansen 1996, 171–74.

transformation sometimes involve detailed homologies, as in the myth of Daphne and Apollo, in which Daphne's hair became the foliage or crown of the tree into which she was transformed, her body became its trunk, and her limbs became its branches. Narrators often do not catalogue such correspondences, probably because myths of radical transformation generally are interested more in what the victim becomes than in exploring homologies, and probably also because the homologies may seem too obvious to mention: if, for example, a person is changed into a bird, we readily assume that the human head becomes a bird head, the arms become wings, and so on. Similarly, homologous transformations can resemble aspectual transformations, as when Tiamat's spittle becomes the clouds and her poison becomes winds, rain, and fog, and as when Ymir's blood or sweat produces the different bodies of water on the earth, for in these myths, as in aspectual transformations, the source element is a bodily fluid (spittle, poison, blood, or sweat) and the resultant element is an ordinary feature of nature (clouds, winds, rain, fog, bodies of water).

There is another important way in which the three kinds of metamorphosis differ from one another. Radical and homologous transformations are usually integral to their narratives, whereas aspectual transformations may not be. The story of Aktaion would make little sense if a narrator were to omit the motif of Aktaion's radical transformation into a stag, and the homologous transformation of Tiamat is an important element of the Babylonian cosmogony. But a narrator can recount the death of Memnon without including the consequence that his mother, Eos, the dawn goddess, sheds tears of grief that manifest themselves on earth as dew; or he can tell of Baldr's death without explaining that tears of grief for Baldr manifest themselves as condensation. Although some aspectual transformations, especially those having to do with the origin of rivers and bodies of water, are crucial to the sense of their narratives, others do not figure in a narrative at all. So rain can be interpreted comically as Zeus's urine, and dew can be understood as the slaver of the celestial horse Hrímfaxi, who crosses the sky nightly. Some aspectual transformations therefore belong more to belief than to story. They can enhance mythic narratives by their presence, but narratives may not be dependent upon them to complete their sense.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis we may now reconsider the myth of foam-born Aphrodite. All of the either/or approaches to the nature of the foam in the myth miss the point. The foam must be neither sea foam to the exclusion of semen nor semen to the exclusion of

sea foam, nor even an intermingling of the two. Rather, Hesiod means both semen and sea foam, not as two different things, but as a single substance within a single conceptual category, *aphros*. The ambiguous identity of the foam in the myth should be understood as an instance of aspectual transformation. From one perspective the foam is Ouranos' semen, but from another perspective the same substance is the froth on the sea:

Ouranos' semen = sea foam.

Indeed, the Greek myth fits the pattern of aspectual transformation precisely, since the source is a bodily exudation and the result is an ordinary and familiar element of the natural world. That the Greek noun *aphros* included both semen and sea foam among its referents facilitated the identification of the two in this myth. As we have seen, similar or shared names are a common feature of transformation narratives, as in the Greek myth of ants (μύρμηκες) transformed into Myrmidons, the myths of Myrrha and of the Heliades whose tears (δάκρυα) exude from the trees into which they have been transformed in the form of sap (δάκρυα), and the Mesopotamian myth of Tiamat's eyes (*īnu*) transformed into springs (*īnu*). In the myth of Aphrodite, semen (*aphros*) becomes sea foam (*aphros*).

A myth might logically represent the froth of the sea as something that had been produced once and for all time or as something that was being manufactured constantly. The Egyptians perhaps imagined Seth as continuously generating salt, his slaver manifesting itself as sea foam, whereas the Greek myth recounted by Hesiod represented the foam on the sea as the consequence of a single event in the early history of the cosmos, semen ejaculated onto the surface of the sea by Sky, whose sexual member had been severed in coitu with Earth. The representation *Ouranos' semen = sea foam* is quite similar in terms of theme and temporal aspect to other cosmic transformative relationships such as the origin of clouds in Tiamat's spittle, the origin of lakes and seas in Ymir's blood or sweat, and the origin of various waters in Raven's urine, all being instances in which the source is certain bodily fluids and the transformative occasion is set in the early, formative period of the universe. Each myth links familiar features of the phenomenal world back to fluids that issued from the body of a mythical being.

If an *aition* for sea foam is present in the myth, why does Hesiod not call explicit attention to it in his narration, as he does in the case of *aitia* such as the origin of Aphrodite's epithets Kythereia and Kypriis?



Is he not aware of this mythologem? From the available evidence there probably is no way to demonstrate with certainty that *Ouranos' semen* = *sea foam* was part of Hesiod's repertory or that it was not, but the poet's finely balanced and ambiguous treatment of *aphros* argues in favor of his acquaintance with the motif, for he narrates the mythic events in such a way that the foam could be semen or sea foam or both, so that semen as referent comes to the mind of some interpreters, sea foam to others, and a mixture of the two to still others.

I suggest that Hesiod has chosen deliberately not to call attention to the motif for the simple reason that this is not the kind of *aition* he is concerned with in his *Theogony*. The poem deals with the grand features of the world: the major parts of the physical cosmos, the Titan gods, the Olympian gods, other noteworthy supernatural beings and forces, their genealogies, their provinces, their cults, their hierarchical relationships, and so on. It does not concern itself with the smaller details of terrestrial topography, with characteristics of flora and fauna, and with other aetiologies of a humbler nature. Such traditions were certainly found in Hesiod's day and in his verse (in other poems, for example, he mentions the metamorphosis of the Heliades' tears into amber),<sup>38</sup> but they had no place in a poem of this sort. In contrast, Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* selects mostly for narratives of smaller and regional import. Whereas the Greek poet focuses upon the origins of the grand elements of the cosmos, the Roman poet hurries past cosmogonic myth and cosmic strife in order to dwell upon the minor details of the world such as flora, fauna, and features of local topography. Consistent with this focus Ovid's poem refers to at least four aspectual transformations: *Aurora's tears* = *dew*; *Myrrha's tears* = *sap*; *Heliades' tears* = *sap* ≈ *amber*; *tears of Marsyas' mourners* = *river*. And in his *Edda* Snorri Sturluson, cataloguing both the grander and the humbler features of the Norse cosmos, includes several instances of aspectual transformation.

An oral story possesses no fixed or proper or necessary form; rather, each time it is narrated its shape and its content reflect a particular narrator's response to the occasion that has called forth the tale. Since the teller adapts the narration to a different context each time, each telling varies, and from that perspective there is no more reason on a particular occasion to ask why a narrator has omitted a possible

<sup>38</sup>He alludes to it in a passage of the *Ehoiai* (fr. 150.22–24 MW) and evidently describes it at greater length elsewhere (fr. 311 MW).

feature of the story than there is to ask why he has included it, as though absence should require justification whereas presence should not. This must especially be true if the element is one that is not crucial to the coherence of the plot, as in the mythologem of semen and sea foam, a motif that may belong more to folk belief than to mythic narrative anyway, as appears to be the case with at least some other instances of aspectual transformation. Hesiod's two tellings of the myth of Pandora illustrate how freely he can adapt a story to specific purposes, for his two versions vary considerably in content and emphasis, each reflecting the nature of the context in which it is employed.<sup>39</sup> So too Hesiod fits his account of Aphrodite's birth to the purposes of the present poem.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
e-mail: hansen@indiana.edu

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boedeker, Deborah D. 1974. *Aphrodite's Entry into Greek Epic*. Mnemosyne Suppl. 32. Leiden: Brill.
- . 1984. *Descent from Heaven: Images of Dew in Greek Poetry and Religion*. American Classical Studies, 13. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press.
- Burkert, Walter. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Translated by John Raffan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Caldwell, Richard S. 1989. *The Origin of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . trans. 1987. *Hesiod's Theogony*. With commentary. Cambridge, Mass.: Focus.
- Dalley, Stephanie. 1989. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dümmler, F. "Aphrodite." 1894. *RE* I 2729–87.
- Dundes, Alan. 1988. "The Flood as Male Myth of Creation." In *The Flood Myth*, edited by Alan Dundes, 167–82. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

<sup>39</sup>*Theog.* 570–616, *WD* 47–105. In the former poem she is unnamed; she is made and attired by Hephaistos and Athena; and she herself as the prototype of all women is Zeus' gift of evil for mankind. In the latter her name is given and explained; she is made and attired by Hephaistos, Athena, the Horai, the Charites, Aphrodite, and Hermes; and her jar is the source of all evils. For the adaptive use of stories by internal narrators in the Homeric poems see Edmunds 1997, 419–20.

- Edmunds, Lowell. 1997. "Myth in Homer." In *A New Companion to Homer*, edited by Ian Morris and Barry Powell, 415–41. Leiden: Brill.
- Forbes Irving, P. M. C. 1990. *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Friedländer, Paul. 1931. Review of *Hesiodi Carmina*, part I, *Theogonia*, edited by Felix Jacoby. *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 241–66.
- Gantz, Timothy. 1993. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Griffiths, J. Gwyn, ed. 1970. *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*. With commentary. Cambridge: University of Wales Press.
- Hansen, William, trans. 1996. *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. With commentary. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Harris, Stephen L., and Gloria Platzner. 1995. *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield.
- Hoffner, Harry A., Jr. 1990. *Hittite Myths*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Kirk, G. S. 1970. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Knoop, Otto. 1912. "Der Tau im Glauben und in der Sage der Provinz Posen." *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 22:89–95.
- Licht, Hans. 1932. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*. Translated by J. H. Freese. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 1986. *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Myers, K. Sara. 1994. *Ovid's Causes: Cosmogony and Aetiology in the Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Nagy, Gregory. 1974. *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Powell, Barry B. 1998. *Classical Myth*. 2d ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Roscher, W. H., ed. 1884–93. *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*. 7 vols. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Sale, William. 1961. "Aphrodite in the *Theogony*." *TAPA* 92:508–21.
- Thompson, George. 1972. *The Greek Language*. Cambridge (U.K.): W. Heffer.
- West, M. L., ed. 1966. *Hesiod: Theogony*. With commentary. Oxford: Clarendon Press.